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My son's karate teacher recently asked his young students, "What's the one thing you really want to improve on in the new year?" Hands shot up immediately, with responses like "Watch less TV!" and "Improve my karate form!" and "Work on my time management!" He asked each student to get more specific, write down the goal, and bring it to the next class. With a wide grin, he told the kids to expect that he would periodically stop class throughout the year to engage everyone around how they were doing.

As I watched the class, I reflected on how these kids were likely to meet their goals because they had the additional support from their teacher and each other. Whether it's kids in a karate class or adults in a Weight Watchers meeting or Toastmasters group, most of us intuitively know the value of having a support group for changing our habits, learning new things, or achieving a New Year's goal.

It is easy, however, to take others' support for granted. We may have friends or colleagues we vent to about work when we've had a bad week. Or perhaps we network when engaged in a formal job search. But in the day-to-day busyness of work, how do we more intentionally bring others "under the tent" in our quest to grow as people and leaders? And how can we take the bull by the horns rather than waiting for our managers or organizations to do it for us?

Below is the story of two leaders who built stronger networks of support and discovered the benefits for themselves and others along the way.

The first leader is Todd, the president of a company, who was increasingly feeling the age-old adage that it's lonely at the top. A self-aware and seasoned leader, he recognized that he needed to rethink his support system, as he was really feeling the pressures of continued bottom-line performance in the context of slowing revenue growth.

The second leader is Jennifer, a leader in operations with a team that had recently doubled in size after an acquisition. Someone was always stopping by her office to ask a question or seek advice. Feeling exhausted, she found herself wondering who she could turn to for advice and how she was going to address recent feedback from her manager to build a stronger executive voice and more confidence with her peers.

Though in different situations, Todd and Jennifer both found value in consciously cultivating and realigning their networks of support. They each had to get into the right mindset, define what they needed, and align the right people. Here's how:

1. Get into the right mindset. As a starting point, both leaders had to address their resistance to moving forward. Todd was concerned about others' perceptions. He valued the expertise, drive, and competence he brought to the role. Would he appear weak and vulnerable if he was more proactive in seeking the support of others? Would he create doubt or a negative perception regarding his capability to lead the organization?

Jennifer relished her identity as a caring leader and strong developer of talent. She wasn't sure that she could really "let go" of the reins and allow herself to receive others' support. She was great at giving to others but did not do as well with receiving support.

Each leader reframed their vision for themselves. Todd decided he wanted to be not only an expert, competent leader, but also a strategic, agile learner. Jennifer decided she wanted to be not just a caring leader, but also a thriving, healthy, and more decisive leader.

2. Define what you need. As Todd and Jennifer became more receptive to the idea of a “network of support,” they considered what kind of specific support they needed. What were the roles that others could play, and which ones were especially critical for each leader’s goals and objectives for the year?

While not exhaustive, below is an illustrative list of the types of support roles a leader might consider having:

- **The Expert:** Even when we are experts ourselves, there is always a learning curve. We need to continually seek out those who have the pattern recognition, experience, or best practices around the issues we’re facing. We need the courage and confidence to demonstrate a “beginner’s mind” — a term from Zen Buddhism, referring to having an openness to learning, even at an advanced level.
- **The Sausage Maker:** Leaders must be able to clearly articulate their conviction and vision to others. Some of us reach this clarity of conviction after hearing ourselves talk out loud or by hashing through data with others. Honor your cognitive process by having someone you can “white board” and brainstorm with on the nitty-gritty details. This person is notably different from the audiences you ultimately need to communicate with in a clear and succinct way.
- **The Role Player:** With so many different stakeholders, we all need someone we can role-play with in advance of a high-stakes interaction. It’s better to understand what rolls off the tip of the tongue naturally or how something comes across in a pre-game warm-up than to find out when the stakes are high on the field. The role player is an invaluable resource for finding the right framing or key messages of any communication.
- **The Mirror:** We all need that one person who can give it to us straight. These are folks who hold up the mirror, hold us accountable, offer valuable feedback, and help us see our blind spots before they become derailers.
- **The Cheerleader:** When we are feeling less steady, a word of acknowledgement that we are doing well and moving the needle can go a long way toward keeping our motivation alive. Know who you can count on to really notice, see, hear, and affirm your value.
- **The Safe Harbor:** Who are the people with whom you can just let your guard down, knowing you can share your ideas, thoughts, and observations without judgment or retribution? As your ideas percolate, who can you count on to listen and consider the possibilities without raining on your parade or trying to one-up you?

3. Determine who fits the bill. We don’t need to find multiple people to match each support role. Sometimes it may be one or two people who fit the bill in many ways. The good news is the person may be right under your nose. In other cases, we may realize that we’ve aligned our support network incorrectly and that it’s time to reshuffle the decks.

In doing this exercise, Todd began to see two of his direct reports in a new light. There was Steve, who was more low-maintenance and had less of an ego than the others on the executive team. He was a safe harbor by nature and, given his integrity and candor, someone who could be a great mirror.

He also saw how Sheila, his CFO, was going to be a critical expert for the group in a year where costs and budgets were coming to the forefront. He wanted to more purposely draw on that expertise now. Finally, he felt motivated to seek out other company presidents who were leading mature companies.

Jennifer realized she needed more support in the way of sausage maker, role player, and cheerleader. They would be critical support as she worked on building a stronger executive voice and presence over the year.

The big “aha moment” for Jennifer was that she had sought this support previously only to realize that the people she’d gone to for guidance fundamentally lacked the patience or empathy to provide it.

As both leaders raised their awareness of how others could support them, they also increased their awareness of how they supported others. Understanding the value of safe harbor support, Todd now wanted to add more of this role to his own leadership style, and to encourage his managers to do the same. He connected a dot to recent employee engagement data, which showed that employees didn’t always feel safe sharing their ideas with managers, and he wondered if this was the missing type of support.

Jennifer knew that with a growing team she would have to flex more muscles in terms of being an expert and a mirror, setting direction and holding others more accountable, rather than just relying on her go-to role of being the cheerleader.

Ultimately, as we become more conscious and appreciative of the support of others, we also become more conscious of how well we offer our support. In doing so, we help ourselves and others tap more deeply into the beauty of positive, healthy, and authentic human connections.

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#), a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book [The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day](#), and co-author of [Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence](#) with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.
